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ABSTRACT

The principal motivation for and main value of the national language concept is its character as a standard for all users, but that standard most often reflects the norms and beliefs of a cultural and economic elite and the "nation" becomes synonymous with the ruling class. It would be more useful to talk about a standard usage imposed on the language's users by the state's institutions and classes, removing the ideological veil surrounding the concept of "nation." The need for a standard exists only in written communication, since the people with enough power to demand to be understood usually make themselves understood. As written communication is accomplished increasingly by computer, the computer could be allowed to standardize and sanitize output. It could then reduce discrimination based on spelling or handwriting. The problem of enforcing a linguistic standard in an "international language" such as English could be resolved by forbidding native speakers of those languages to speak them among non-native speakers, forcing them to speak a language not native to them and ending linguistic imperialism. (MSE)

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To the Language Born:
Thoughts on the Problem of National and International Languages

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Jacob Mey (Odense University)

TO THE LANGUAGE BORN:
Thoughts on the problem of national and international languages.

Introduction

There are various ways of approaching the 'national language problem'. The first is to deny that there is such a thing as a problem: we all know what national languages are; they are embodied in our institutions, codified in our national legislation, and represented in our consciousness of ourselves as a nation. This I will call the nationalist-extremist position.

Another approach takes the opposite tack. Since the concept of nation itself is such a befuddled one, there is not the slightest sense in talking about a/the national language. There are no national languages; the national language is a fiction. This I will call the anti-nationalist extreme.

Between the nationalist and the anti-nationalist extremes, however, there must be a reasonable middle. The point is how to define that intermediate position: and to do this not just by reference to the extremes from which it is distinguished, but by giving it a positive content of its own.

In the following, then, I will assume that there are such things as national languages, but I will not from the outset tie myself down to one particular definiens, such as the concept of nation, people, territory, history, etc. All these (as well as some other) conceptual entities play a role in defining our concept, but none of them, taken by itself, is sufficient for providing a workable definition of national language.

National Language and Individual Consciousness

In this section, I will concentrate on the basic fact that the concept of a national language is a well-established one among the peoples of what we usually call the 'civilized' world. That is to say, the concept is not well-established by reference to its intension, but rather by its extensional relations to other concepts. Among the latter, the one that comes most easily to mind is that of dialect, here understood in the general sense of: a variety of a (national) language that is spoken (usually not written) in a restricted environment, such as the home or family, the peer group, the local surroundings, or the like.

The following may serve to illustrate what I am referring to.

First, an excerpt from an interview with KB, a native speaker of Norwegian, on Jan. 28, 1985. The speaker is an educated woman in her mid 30's, living in a rural community of Telemark county, S. Norway. She was born and raised, and went to school in another urban part of S. Norway, viz. one of the industrial-commercial agglomerations on the East side of the Oslofjord, in Østfold county. At the time of the interview, she had been living in Telemark county for approximately 14 years.
(The following is a transcript (more or less verbatim) of a conversation with the author of this article; the interviewee was given the opportunity of checking the transcript for correctness).

"JM: I noticed you used the word sparkstøtning [a popular means of transportation in the winter, consisting basically of a highbacked chair on long gliders] - isn't that rather formal? [Personally, I (JM) never say anything but sparkstøtting or spark, as most people shorten it]. How's that?

KB: In school, they always told us not to use this or that form. Only now, living here [in Seljord, a rural center in Telemark county], where people speak a dialect, I feel free to speak my own language. But I use many words that are not mine, such as people around here use; when I write a letter, reading it through I find that I use almost every allowed form on the books, and some others as well. My language is a real mixture, but I don't feel cramped any more. Of course, when I go to the city [Oslo], I try to sound more polite, speak nicely, like they taught me at school...

JM: So you use formal language along with informal. Is there any rule?

KB: They [the school people] always made us feel inferior, since we weren't allowed to use our dialect, but had to use the 'correct' forms. See, now I say sjøl ['self'], and it is only now that I can say this, feeling free to do so. Before, I used to feel I should say selv [the 'correct' form, for certain speakers]...

JM: But you do feel there's somebody up there who lays down the law - this you can say and this you can't?

KB: I can't understand who makes these laws. Look, even 'important' people from around where I come from, such as this fellow Apenes [a lawyer and author from Frederikstad, Østfold, and a Conservative MP], he is so well-known, on TV all the time, but when you listen closely, it's all there, no matter how hard he tries, the nasal sounds, the broad a's, the palatalized l's - but why is he trying to speak 'correctly' in the first place? Shouldn't it be alright for him, too, to be from here [i.e. KB's home town, not the place she's living now]...?

JM: So what's wrong with your language?

KB: Everybody seems to agree that our dialect is the ugliest of all Norwegian dialects. And everybody agrees that dialects like sognemål or vossing [the dialects of Sogn county, resp. the region around Voss; both in the West of Norway] are so beautiful - and yet nobody 'understands' what these people say. Us, they understand but despise: they say that we don't really speak Norwegian but rather some kind of Danish. That's the worst thing about it - that they don't accept us as good Norwegians...

JM: So, in a way, you feel that what these people say, sets you apart from the rest of the nation. But what is a nation, anyway?

KB: That's the kind of stuff we used to write essays about in High School! But no matter how you try to define it, it always escapes definition, and you find yourself thrashing around in circles. But we felt that it was very wrong of them to call us Danes because of our language. If anything, we're much closer to Sweden, also language-wise...

Funny though, as kids, we used to say that we'd rather die than marry a man speaking a dialect - just imagine, you couldn't understand what your husband said! And then, of course, we didn't realize that we spoke a dialect, too...

JM: So now you feel more proud of your dialect than you used to?

KB: You know what, some time ago this theater critic [the late Erik Pierstorff in Dagbladet, a Liberal, Oslo-based newspaper] reviewed a satirical comedy, opening at the Norske Teater [the nynorsk scene (on nynorsk, see below) in Oslo]. It was written in the dialect of my home [the industrial-commercial

agglomeration of Sarpsborg/Frederikstad]. And he remarked that he couldn't see the point of using precisely this dialect - it had neither wit nor charm, he said...

JM: What do you think will happen to the dialects in Norway?

KB: Well, I'll tell you something. Quite close to here there's a place called Edland -- 200 people living quite isolated and speaking a real old-fashioned dialect until recently. But now, with TV covering more and more of Norway, these people are starting to speak like the rest of us. That's a pity, I think.
Also, at Bø [the local shopping and school center for the lower parts of Telemark county] they're considering establishing bokmål classes now, where up till now they only have had nynorsk in the schools. Naturally, the nynorsk people are very worried, but what can they do?" [bokmål and nynorsk are the two official ('national') languages of Norway; the former is predominant in the urban areas and most of the press; the latter is supported by the majority of Norwegians living in rural parts of the county (around 20% of the population in 1975)].

The second excerpt is from a recent Norwegian novel (Brantenberg 1985: 64-65). The two interlocutors are Beate, a 15-year old girl from a working-class environment, who goes to the City High School, and her mother. In her freshman year, Beate becomes conscious of the 'ugly' language she and her surroundings use, and contrasts this with what the teachers at her school try to inculcate into their students as the 'correct' standard. (Notice in particular the author's fine irony in letting Beate make use of the very forms she has been taught to ostracize, in order to condemn all 'wrong' language (cf. ille, orda in the text below).

"It's ugly to say ho ['she'; for hun], Beate said, - and it's wrong to say ille ('very'; literally: 'badly'), and it's terribly (ille [!]) vulgar to say båtær and bilær and bussær ('boats', 'cars', 'buses'; for båter, biler, busser), and all sorts of things that we have been saying all the time; that's not how we should have talked, and -a at the end of all the words (orda [!]), we have to stop saying that, and Frederikstad people, they use the wrong language as soon as they open their mouths, especially here on Chapel Rock (Kapellfjellet; [a low-class housing environment away from the city center]). Now I will train myself to talk nice."
"Is that what you're learning over at school?"
"Yes. There are lots of funny dialects in Norway, and people all over say the

strangest things. But the way we talk in this town, that's not a dialect. That's just plain wrong. Do you understand?"
"No. Is that what your teacher's telling you?"
"Yes. For example..." etc.

What we can learn from the above excerpts is the following:

(a) Even though Norwegian dialects (or at least some of them) are considered 'beautiful', etc., the amount of prestige involved in using a dialect, as compared to using the standard language, is very limited.

(b) The standard language(s), as taught in the schools, is (are) felt by learners to be a roadblock on the way to full linguistic self-realization. In the case of KB, this latter achievement came only after she moved out of her original linguistic area, and years after she finished her education. But also in her case, the influence and prestige of the norms taught in the schools continue to prevail, even against her own newly-won freedom and consciousness.

(c) In the case of Norway, the situation is, of course, a bit more complicated than in countries recognizing only one standard. Norway, as is well known, has two official languages, bokmål and nynorsk (cf. above). Within these two main languages, local varieties of different prestige obtain; quite obviously, the (rural) varieties of nynorsk are usually perceived as quaint, rather than ugly, and even if they do not confer a lot of social prestige, they are not socially discriminated against. Quite the opposite is the case for those (urban) dialects that are said to 'pertain to' bokmål (for whatever such an ascription is worth). These are, in many cases, considered not only as ugly, but vulgar and stupid; they are socially downgrading. Cases in point are the local dialects of the Eastern wards of the city of Oslo, the dialects of the industrial towns on both sides of the Oslofjord (also here a clear negative bias towards the East), the rural districts of certain parts of Southeastern Norway (especially Østfold and Hedmark counties), and so on. Conversely, there are almost no dialects that, as such, lend prestige to their speakers (a few notable exemptions are certain urban dialects of the South, and of course the dialect of the city of Bergen in the West, albeit here, too, with numerous exceptions and restrictions). The only 'dialect' (if we may call it that) which carries instant remuneration in the form of social esteem and greater

acceptability, is the language which invariably is ornated with the epitheton 'cultivated', or, in a more sweeping way of speaking, 'nice', as opposed to 'ugly': two adjectives that crop up time and again in any discussion on dialects and 'correct' use of language, and of course not exclusively among speakers of Norwegian. (This is especially clear in the second excerpt above; cf. Gulliksen (1979)).

(d) The crucial paradox in all this seems to be that whereas the schools make every effort to teach their students a 'nice' language, it is still the case that for the majority of the latter, that language never becomes anything but a straitjacket, to be donned or doffed, given the proper occasion. Even among the 'succesful' minority, there will be many who spend years and years in liberating themselves linguistically, and then only at the price of mixing together "all allowed forms", as my interviewee KB puts it; that is, the tyranny of the standard dialect can only be done away with at the price of abandoning all norms whatsoever. (On the attractions of "talking ugly", see the interesting inquiry by Gulliksen (1979)).

Dialect or language: The national standard

If the evidence in the previous section is considered from the two extreme positions sketched above in the Introduction to this article, we see that neither is able to make a convincing case, even though both contain an element of truth.

The nationalist will point out that the existence of a standard 'dialect', even though it is only imperfectly realized in most cases, documents the legitimacy and necessity of a national language as the norm for all dialects.

The anti-nationalist will argue that precisely this fact, viz. that the national norm only exists as an abstract system of rules, realized, at best, in a dwindling minority of native speakers, illustrates the uselessness of the whole concept of a 'national language'.

As I said before, both positions cannot be true at the same time, since they contradict each other. This 'external' contradiction, as one may call it, is

borne out by an 'internal' weakness common to both concepts: their linkage to the idea of a 'nation'. It is certainly true that the original concept of 'nation' had something to do with the idea of being 'born into' certain properties, rights, and duties, among these the ability to speak a language 'natively'. However, the 'nation' concept, when used about language, fails to carry over to the modern nation-state, the latter being the product of a much more recent development. The national state, as such, never really was established until the beginning of the Modern Age for most European countries (Italy and Germany being among the more notorious come-lately's in this respect).

As an illustration, consider the fact that the original Latin (Vulgata) version of the Bible uses both populi and gentes (the latter usually narrowed down to mean 'gentiles', as the equivalent of the Hebrew goyim, and in fact often translated, for lack of a better equivalent, as 'nations'), whereas Latin natio usually has a tribal as well as a linguistic connotation. The author of the Acts of the Apostles, in the famous scene (2: 4-13) where different people are said to be hearing the miracles of God, "every man [sic!] in our own tongue, wherein we were born", by a kind of divinely-organized (and in itself miraculous) simultaneous translation, uses precisely the word natio (viri religiosi ex omni natione quae sub caelo est); and the sacred text immediately links this up with the notion of 'being born' (natus) in(to) a language (audivimus unusquisque linguam nostram, in qua nati sumus). Similarly in Classical Latin, natio is used (as, e.g., by Caesar in De Bello Gallico) in the sense of 'tribe': 'a band of people linked together by common "language, institutions, and laws"' (lingua, institutis, legibus; B.G. I: 1). Whereas the Roman nation always is referred to by Caesar as populus Romanus, the Gauls are a natio, distinguished, among other things, by their dedication to all things religious (cp.: natio ... Gallorum admodum dedita religionibus; B.G. VI: 16).

During the Middle Ages (and for a long time after), the universities organized their students by 'nations', i.e. what we today perhaps would call 'ethnic groupings'; a relic of this is still found in today's Swedish and Finnish universities, where the student body (studentkåren) divides up its members according to their native counties or regions: any such subdivision is still called a nation in Swedish (in the Finnish equivalent osakunta, liter. 'part-body', the historic allusion has been lost).

The trouble with the concept of 'national language' is that it refers to an historical state of affairs which is no longer existent. As so often is the case, history outruns language, or alternatively, people omit to adjust their language to the changed environments, persisting in using the old terms for new things, putting "new wine into old bottles", with the well-known disastrous results (St. Luke 5:37).

Whereas the old idea of 'nation' directly related to "language, [religious] institutions, and laws" (as witnessed by the classical authors), with the advent of the 'national state' we are confronted with a quite different concept: that of the people organized (or organizing themselves) into administrative units with fixed boundaries, a central authority, and cultural, rather than strictly linguistic homogeneity. Thus, the former New England colonies, on achieving independence, referred to themselves as "one nation indivisible under God" (Preamble to the Constitution), but adopted, as their official name, the much more appropriate United States. And so we have the paradox that words like nation, national, currently are used to refer to all sorts of institutions and concepts that, properly speaking, are as far removed from the old 'nation' as is the modern 'state' itself (think of expressions such as across the nation, nationwide, national security, or even the (strictly denumerable) set n^{th} national Bank of X, where n is a natural number (usually ≤ 5), and X may represent any element within the (local) geographical universe).

Against this backdrop, it makes no sense to speak of a 'national language', unless we mean something entirely different from the old concept: 'a language spoken by a certain group of people called a nation'. No wonder then, too, that we have 'nations' (in the modern sense of 'nation-state') with more than one language, something which would be excluded under the primitive one-to-one relationship of 'nation' and 'institution' (in the widest sense of the term). The case of Norway that I referred to above, section 1, serves to illustrate this: here, one has two national languages with equal rights, guaranteed in all official and legal contexts. And, of course, the case is by no means unique: in Switzerland, we have as many as four national languages (of which the fourth, Romansh, only recently has come into full recognition, as witnessed by the fact that from 1976 on, Swiss money bills carry a fourfold legend of languages where there used to be the three major ones only: French, Italian, and German). Or, to take an extreme case: would anybody

dare to name the 'national language' of a country like Nigeria? The most we can say here is that we have an official language, adopted by the state for its business across the nation - but what is this 'nation'? And whose is 'the' national language, anyway?[1]

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1) Compare also the following instances from languages outside our Western circles:
The Japanese National Language Research Institute in Tokyo is called: Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyū, i.e. literally: 'State Institute of the National Language', where the word koku means, primarily, 'state, kingdom', but apparently also functions as the equivalent of 'nation(al)'. Here, 'state' and 'nation' are not even distinguished in their lexical representaitons.
Similarly, in Gal'cev's Introduction to the study of Chinese (1962), one finds the word 'nation(al)' in three different, mutually more or less exclusive surroundings:
(a) "the Chinese national language" (and, e.g., its dialects; cf. 1962:5)
(b) "a multinational state" (said of the People's Republic of China; ibid.)
(c) "the literary form of the national language" (as opposed to the other form, "based on the norm for spoken language"; ibid.: 12). This language is also called the "generally accepted language" (pu-tun-hua).
(d) "The all-national language pu-tun-hua" (ibid.: 19)
From these quotes, it would appear that in a Chinese context, the term 'national' has at least the same double meaning as in Japan: 'belonging to the state', as in 'all-national' (and, by the same token 'generally accepted'); both are translations of Chin. pu-tōng-hua:

(according to Gal'cev (1962:12,19): "общенациональный" resp. "обшераспространенный язык"); but that furthermore, the 'national language' is based, first of all, upon the written, literary standard. Clearly, none of these meanings of 'national' make sense together with 'multinational', as in (b); furthermore, the main content of the notion 'national', as in (d) or (a), seems to be its superordinate status, further specified (as in (c)) by reference to the literary standard.

A 'National Language': ideology or reality?

Having established the impossibility of dealing with the concept of 'national language' on a simple, realistic level, like: What does it (universally or locally) refer to? or: Where does it come from?, we may now try to determine it in other, perhaps more subtle ways. Or, to put it differently: we cannot just kill the 'nation' as the definiens for 'national language' and leave it at that. The very variety of the ways this concept is used, points at its importance and viability - even though it may not commend itself by virtues like well-definedness. Or, maybe more precisely: Whenever we seem to have to do with a well-defined case of a 'national language', e.g. in the form of descriptions, teaching materials, or other literature (e.g. anthologies), making explicit or implicit reference to the concept of a 'national', or even 'supra-national' language, as the case may be, the fortunate object of that honorific appellation turns out to be a particular dialect, commended by high prestige or otherwise.

A typical instance is Chao's (1925) description of the "Chinese National Language", a pioneering work in that it used gramophone recordings at a time when the Linguaphone method hadn't even begun to overcome its childhood's diseases; yet also a living testimony to the hegemony claims that usually are inherent in terms such as 'national': the 'national language', as described by Chao, is nothing but the dialect of Peking! (see Gal'cev 1962: 116).[2]

The question before us now is to decide how to characterize the 'national language', if it cannot be ascribed to the nation, that mythical beast. Should we simply declare it to be a by-product of ideology, to be discarded as a useless chimaera?

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2) The task of the all-nation (!) conference on the future teaching of Chinese that was called in 1912, one year after the Revolution, was to discuss the necessity of introducing the teaching of "the national [literally: 'all-state'] language" (Gal'cev 1962:92); as it proved to be the case, the pronunciation norms that were decided upon (by majority voting !) were obtained by a "mechanical identification of the sounds of the Peking dialect with the sound phenomena of the other dialects" (ibid.: 93-94). This effort at unification, however, never caught on: as Gal'cev remarks (1962:15), the people continued to use their own local dialects. In the end, the official confirmation of this supremacy of the Peking dialect came in 1930-1932, when the 'all-nation' syllabary that had been elaborated by the 1912 conference, was brought to conform with Peking speech. (ibid.)

The answer to this first question is both easy to give, and hard to account for. Of course, the 'national language' is not to be done away with by administrative, educational, or scientific fiat. But on the other hand, it cannot be understood without reference to ideology. If we just were to call it a useful piece of ideological home industry, not to be taken too seriously, another question, of course, still remains, namely, for whom that particular piece of ideology may be useful. Naturally, these two questions cannot be separated.

Human language is the realization of human consciousness. We take cognizance of our world by establishing conceptual relationships, and realizing these in the shape of words, sentences, and texts. Conversely, our 'wording', as I call it (for this concept and its definition, see Mey 1985, esp. ch. 3.2), influences our praxis: conscious praxis becomes praxis of consciousness, and the practice thusly consecrated ("conscienticized", to use a term coined by Freire (1968)) in its turn influences our wording. This continuous, dialectic movement is the basic presupposition for all language, both in its origin and its use. However, the dialectics is not by any means a merely 'spiritual' one. Praxis is what is the matter, in the strict sense of the word: What matters is the material world to which our words extend, and from which they come back, laden with the enrichment of material praxis. However, this praxis is also a fight to continue an existence against all odds, a controversy where, no matter how well we practice our wording and word our practice, Nature will have the last word: "That is the end of the world news", in Anthony Burgess' phrase (1982:x).

If we consider a nation as a group of people working together to realize their 'practical' aims (this is not a definition, but at best a rather ingenuous assumption), then we could metaphorically consider the nation's 'Gross Cultural Product' as represented in language by some means of 'culture production'. Of course, there are other 'products', too, but none of them are as all-pervasive of our culture, and as encompassing, as language (at least not in our present, Western civilization). However, just as in the case of the nation's economic production, there are important differences, too, in the roles which society allots to its individual members in the process of cultural production. People come into this world in all kinds, with widely differing capacities and possibilities, for material as for cultural production; and so the question is not only to be born, but to be born into the right class. As the old

saying goes: Once a 'have-not', always a 'have-not' (exceptions notwithstanding). And if you're one of the 'haves', born into wealth and glory, you're certainly not interested in sharing all that with the 'have-nots'. The praxis of the affluent is meant to guarantee their riches, to increase rather than dispense them. The cultural product that reflects this practice is similarly geared towards conserving the status quo that favors the rich, not towards promoting revolutionary thinking. Thus we find that in every period of history, the well-to-do protect themselves, not only by physically oppressing the poor, but by planting cultural hedges around their 'property', erecting educational and other roadblocks on the paths giving access to the higher layers of society.

Knowledge, as we all know, represents power. Knowing how to perform a certain operation not only enables me to play a role in the production of the goods that are necessary for my survival - it makes it also possible for me to keep the others out, by withholding that knowledge from them, or at least controlling their access to it. This is true both of the knowledge that goes into purely physical products, and of that knowledge which is a prerequisite for organizing the material production on a higher level (technical and industrial 'know-how'). It is also true of those processes which, directly or indirectly, in reality or ideology, influence and steer the overall planning of society's material and cultural existence. To describe those processes, we use words like religion, culture, science, philosophy, literature, art, and so on. The most interesting question to ask about them is not "where do they all come from" (like one is wont in those eternal, and indeed somewhat jaded quarrels on 'base' and 'superstructure' in certain trends of the Marxist dialogue). The important aspect that unites all these 'products' is their being manifestations of human consciousness, their constituting embodiments of conscienticized human praxis that in some, or maybe all, ways depend upon, and are represented by language. In this sense, language is the true constituent of all higher forms of society: It represents society for itself and by itself. In the strictest sense of the word, language legitimates society: Language lays down the law inasmuch as it represents the steering principles of human consciousness in human praxis.

This intimate association between the 'language of the realm' and the latter's governing consciousness (its ideology, if one wants to call it that) branches

out in two directions: Diachronically, the traditional possession of the 'cultural values' (used here as a cover term) by the ruling classes is not an accident of history, but an ontogenetic necessity; synchronically, the control exercised by the ruling classes of society in cultural matters imposes itself as a visible check on language, its system and use.

The fact that language control came into vogue precisely at the onset of the capitalistic era is by no means accidental (unless one wants to call it an 'accident of history', which, properly speaking, is a contradiction in itself). The diverse 'Academies' that have burgeoned across Europe in newer history were (unlike their predecessor-in-name, the Athenian Academy of Plato and his friends) no mere debating clubs or philosophical walking guilds: They were from the beginning (and consciously) endowed with the power of censuring, hence of ruling and legislation. That is, they were the means by which the emerging rulers endeavored (in most cases, successfully) to confirm their rising consciousness as the future arbiters, not just of the arts, but of society itself.[3] Yet, the rules they laid down were no 'arbitrary' instruments of power display; they had a very distinct function, viz., to channel and direct the new consciousness of society, of which language was the prime expression. In this way, a double purpose was served: One, the 'cultural heritage' (read: the ideology legitimating the division of societal power) was safeguarded; two, any effort at a revolutionary overthrow of the existing power structures could be nipped in the bud.

The single standard

The most efficient way to control any process at all is to constantly supervise it. However, this is usually impossible: there are other things in life than

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3) Characteristic is the following blunt remark by Boileau, one of the chief 'movers' in the French cultural struggle following the establishment of the Académie Française (Boileau was born in its founding year, 1632; his repartee was sparked by Louis XVI's enthusiasm for a minor work by a forgotten poetaster of the period): "Your Majesty should leave the judgment on these matters to those who are qualified to judge". Rather than having him imprisoned for lèse-majesté, the Roi-Soleil is said to have followed the advice of his underling, whose words indeed embodied 'the law' (Boileau used to be called 'le législateur du Parnasse').

supervision, and the show must go on. So instead, you introduce the check: Either as a point in time/space through which the process must pass (as in the case of a military or customs checkpoint), or by setting up a body of rules according to which the process must be performed, whereupon you inculcate these rules by force or instill them by persuasion. The latter method has the additional advantage (if it is successful, that is) of gradually eliminating the need for direct control altogether: Instead of actively supervising a particular process yourself, you can delegate your power to the rules that are built into the persons performing the process.

There is one condition, though. Or rather, there are two, but they are usually collapsed into one: The rules must be unique and they must be yours. If the rules leave room for voluntary decisions on the part of the performers, you can never be sure which way the process eventually will be going. Especially in big operations, like joint military or economic enterprises, this is an absolutely crucial condition. On the other hand, you must be sure that the rules faithfully reflect your view of the process, as far as its implementation and ultimate aims are concerned. If somebody from the outside manages to pervert the rule system, you can be sure of one thing: That will not be to your advantage, but to his or hers.

The steering of the cultural processes, inasmuch as these embody the governing consciousness of our society, is a matter of no small importance. The rulers of society, that is, the people who profit from the way society is organized and who would stand to lose enormously if things were to change, have every interest in keeping the current governing consciousness alive and well. Language, as the most powerful instrument of forming and expressing that consciousness (the "wording of the world", alluded to earlier), enjoys the same importance. Linguistic rules are no trivial matter in our society: Grammar is a real "tyrant", as I have called it elsewhere (Mey 1979). The reason for its power lies in the importance of the linguistic 'checks', both as continuity-preserving measures and as defenders of a monopoly. If I can disqualify a potential opponent by reference to his or her 'bad accent' or faulty orthography, I will already have won a minor victory. But if I can keep that person out of the circles of influence altogether, e.g. by putting up signs of "No Admission" ("except for duly accredited persons"), I will be able to sit on my privileges for ever.

The functioning of these cultural 'hedges' depends to a large degree on whether we can define a standard for our culture that poses as universal, but in reality is the proper privilege, native or by education, of the selected few. And since in our society, access to educational privileges has become increasingly more important than birth-rights, taken by themselves, the importance of the language rules has increased, too. Access to education is, of course, in many cases a matter of being able to pay your school fees. But on top of it, the educational system favors those with the correct social and economic background. Not because that background in itself carries weight (in a democracy, all backgrounds should theoretically be equal; however, remember Orwell!), but since such a background carries with it a certain set of the mind, reflected in an acceptance of the way our society has organized itself, in particular the standards that it imposes. Respect for rules, in particular for the rules of grammar, is a 'birth-mark' of the upper and middle classes in our society, and an extremely important ingredient of the 'hidden' curriculum of our institutions of education (and the higher the education, the more important this curriculum tends to be, at the same time that it becomes gradually more hidden). Language standards are an integrated part of this system; as such, they have a definite controlling task in our society.

5. National or Standard?

From what I have said so far, it has become clear that the main motivation for, as well as the main value of the 'national language' concept is its character of a standard for all users. I have argued that such a standard, although in principle established for all of the people (in our times even, as in the case of Chinese after the 1911 revolution, by means of so-called democratic procedures, such as the voting-by-majority in a conference of representative delegates), still expresses the norms and beliefs of the very few, viz., those for whom a certain, now defunct political philosophy had devised the name of 'culture-bearers': The cultural and economic elite.

Thus, the 'Nation' becomes implicitly identical with the 'ruling class', just as the 'educated language', which is taken as the basis for the legalized system of rules, belongs to those who have had the privilege of an education, thereby eliminating all those who, for reasons of economy, geographical distance, or

working and housing conditions, have been unable to 'get themselves' that education. (And if they do obtain an education, it is of course, still on the premises laid down for them by those others).[4]

My thesis is, therefore, that we should 'unmask', debunk the concept of 'national' language, and instead talk about a 'standard', imposed on the users of the 'national' languages by the State's powerful, its institutions and classes. The advantage of such an approach is that is pulls away the ideological veil surrounding the concept of 'nation'. You can argue about a standard, but the idea of a 'nation' is unarguable, for a variety of reasons (some of which I have mentioned above). Thus, the hidden oppression, implicit in the notion 'national' (cf. the quote in the interview above on "not being a good Norwegian"), can be brought into the open and finally done away with.

The question whether or not we need a standard for language (use) has not been explicitly discussed so far. Neither will I do this in the sequel, but only point out one interesting aspect that could change the tenor of the old arguments pro et con.

In discussing the relative advantages of different grammatical models, we used to put a great deal of emphasis on 'naturalness' and 'simplicity'. These

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4) Traditionally, in our modern societies, it is especially the written language that most of the time is seen as serving the perpetuation of our culture. Yet, also this truth suffers some qualification.
The Swedish novelist and essayist Frans G. Bengtsson (1981) reflects in his piece 'The long-haired Merovingians' on the supposedly authentic case of the cub football reporter of The Chicago Herald, who suddenly finds himself in the awkward position of having to review a performance of Shakespeare's Othello for his newspaper. Not knowing anything about literature (he isn't even familiar with the name of Shakespeare!), he describes what he sees on the scene as a football match (though he mentions, in passing, that the piece also could have a message with respect to the problems of racially mixed marriages).
The review was a resounding success - and many people went to see Othello who otherwise never would have, and the football reporter was promoted to the literary criticism department of the paper. As Bengtsson remarks, this anecdote shows us the importance of looking at cultural events through non-cultural glasses. In my terminology, I would say that the young, inexperienced reporter, without even realizing it, rebelled against the standardized interpretation of our culture, as it is embodied in (among other things) our university curricula, and against those persons who, representing the official, institutionalized culture, aspire to a unique knowledge of, and dictatorial authority in, matters of culture (including the use of language).

qualities were thought of, first of all, as theoretical assets of certain models. The more 'natural' or 'simple' a model, the better the theory behind it was thought to be. But in the sequel, these notions carried over to other fields of interest as well: for instance, a 'natural' and 'simple' grammatical model was thought of as indispensable in conceptualizing what was going on in the process of language acquistition (either by first, or second, third, etc. language learners). From simple model to 'simplified' grammar, however, the road is a very short one; hence, the advocates of such pedagogical monstrosities as 'Basic English' joined hands with those who defended the 'simple standard', e.g. in speaking and spelling (cf. the various 'simplified' spelling movements which created, as their main effect, more, rather than less, confusion in matters of orthography and 'language feel'). In general, however, the idea of standardizing human speech in the interest of better communication is about just as profound as the notion that we should communicate with a computer in digital or octal (or even, God forbid, make our brains function that way!)

Moreover, the standard that is purportedly indispensable for our understanding a message is, first of all, the written language's (cf. all the arguments stressing the value of a standardized orthography). The claim that "people wouldn't understand each other if there weren't some kind of a standard" holds strictly only for written communication; in oral interaction, it seldom happens that people with enough social clout to demand to be understood, don't get the message across, standard or no standard.

But suppose now most of our written communication takes place by computer -- which surely is not an improbable perspective for the next few decades. Wouldn't we then be able to let the computer standardize our output, rather than continue to have the familiar bore and scourge of spelling and other standards as a requirement on successful communication between individuals? De-ideologized, i.e. class- and otherwise sanitized routines could take the brunt off educational privileges and their effects, stressing the latter's purely instrumental character of providing access routes to individual and social communication. Nobody could be discriminated against because of a faulty orthography, simply because the need to spell correctly would henceforth be redefined as a mechanical requirement, embodied in computerized spelling routines, much like the already existing ones, but without all their imperfections and shortcomings. We may deplore the downfall of spelling as a

handicraft, in the same way that we, from a purely esthetical point of view, may lament the decay of the art of calligraphy ever since the advent of the typewriter and its successor, the computerized printing device. However, one thing is certain: Today, no one who is applying for a job will receive preferential treatment because of a nice handwriting; it is a quaint employer who will choose a person on the grounds of a beautifully handwritten application alone -- ceteris paribus, of course, and disregarding the possible graphological aspects of job-screening. A privilege has gone down the drain along with a craft; nothing for nothing in this world.

National or international? Conclusion.

In this final section, I want to consider a practical aspect of linguistic standardization, or more correctly, of enforcing a 'national' linguistic standard (whatever that means or implies) on people of other linguistic backgrounds.[5] Standardization, in this connection, often comes close to discrimination; and its main instrument are the language tests that often block for an alien's acquiring a permanent residence permit or citizenship in his/her new country of residence. While it makes some sense to ensure that people can understand and use the language of the country where they want to spend their lives, the way these tests often are administered makes them look more like convenient, one-way barriers than sensible road-stations on the way to integration into the new community (for details, see Skutnabb-Kangas 1981).

But the problem of non-natives speaking a language that, although not their own, yet in many ways is as important for them (or even more important) as

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5) Although this aspect has acquired increased popularity among those that object to the presence of non-native residents among an autochthonous population, I will pass by in silence arguments based on a nationality ideology smacking of nationalism or its dangerously close relative, racism. That the national language should be a precondition for 'national' feelings makes no sense in any context. Even for believers in things national, the existence of 'multinational' states (in itself a conceptual enormity) must turn all such considerations into pumpkin meat. Nobody will seriously question the quality of Swiss nationalism, or of patriotic feelings among Norwegians; yet, the Swiss have four national languages, the Norwegians two. Such arguments are only useful when one wants to attack groups of people that are considered undesirable for other (e.g. economic) reasons. This nationalism is just so much ideology, witness the interview quoted at the beginning of this article.

(than) their native tongue, is by no means limited to discriminatory measures against immigrant workers. There are mainly two kinds of surroundings in which this problem-tangle gets activated: The first is the area of foreign language instruction; the second is that of what I will call 'International English'.

As to the first, I will restrict myself to a reference. Research in the theory of foreign language acquisition has lately begun to be interested in the non-standard varieties that non-native speakers construct during acquisition of a 'second mother tongue'. Such 'interlanguages', as they are called, have been unequivocally determined (e.g. by Wagner 1983) as being valuable intermediate, yet important steps in acquiring a language and in 'wording' the world (cf. above). Any strict application of standard criteria for correctness in such a context makes, of course, no sense at all.

But the buck doesn't stop here. Most, not to say all, second language acquirers will never make the 'standard' in all respects - but on reflection, how many natives do, and why should they be treated more leniently and understandingly as regards this kind of requirement? Besides, even native users may, given the proper occasion, feel themselves less strictly obliged to a rigorous observance of the "grammatical tyrant's" rules. Nash (1982) recounts the experiences of a 'displaced' native speaker of American English who, having lived for several years in a foreign environment (Puerto Rico), observes that "strict adherence to conventional English spelling practices at all times" seems less and less essential: on the contrary, such fidelity is experienced as "both unnecessary and troublesome" (Nash 1982: 259). Clearly, what is sauce to the native goose is also good for the ungrammatical gander (or vice versa, as the case may be).

There are, however, important groups of second (third, .., etc.) language users that neither are immigrants, nor aspire to living their lives in foreign surroundings: I mean the numerous people that, for some reason or other, have to use non-native languages in order to communicate with native speakers of those languages, either in their daily business, or at least on special, usually important occasions.

As an instance of the former case, consider all those whose native tongues or dialects are permanently and irrevocably defined as being outside the 'civilized', standardized language community. One can think of tribal languages in most countries of Africa, much of the Americas, or even Europe; for instance, the third language of Norway, Samic (or Lapp, as it used to be called by non-natives) is still not recognized as one of the official languages of the country; the fourth language of Switzerland has had a lot of problems, too (cf. what I have said earlier). But all this is peanuts compared, e.g., to what native North-African speakers of Berber must go through in their communication with government organs above the strictly local level: Without a minimal knowledge of Arabic or French, or without the assistance of a knowledgeable intermediary, such persons will never get anywhere in dealing with 'their' authorities.

The other group I'm thinking of in this connection are the people that, for reasons such as business or scientific contacts, political conferences and meetings (yes, and even touristic purposes!) have to use a medium of communication that is not their own. Lately, a number of people (among these the Japanese linguist Takao Suzuki, and also the author of these lines) have become interested in the problems that face users of (mainly) English in their contacts with native, as well as with fellow non-native speakers of that particular language. Typically, what happens is this: The non-native, user of 'International English' (the term is Suzuki's; pers. comm.) feels discriminated against when native speakers, because of their greater fluency and ease, completely drown out what he/she has to say. On top of that, the stark 'non-nativeness' of such a person's accent is perceived, both by the speaking subjects themselves and by their interlocutors, as detracting from the content of what he/she is trying to convey.

There are, of course, people who will argue that "If you speak a language other than your own, you have to emulate, or at least try and imitate, a native standard". But this brings up not only the problem of how to choose among the various, existing native standards of a language (such as American vs. British usage in the case of English), but furthermore, the requirement is as illusory as it is unfair. Barring non-understandability, the non-native should not be forced to conform to (a) standard(s) that not even the majority of (let alone all) native speakers adhere to (cp. the pretensions of some local

teachers of English in a country like Denmark, who seriously believe that they are bringing up their students in 'Oxford English'!) Rather than forcing the non-native speakers' hands, we should recognize the existence of 'non-standard' varieties of languages (all the while taking care not to confuse these with 'sub-standard' ones, and distancing ourselves from whatever discriminating purposes the latter term may be put to use for). There will, of course, always be differences in societal importance between such 'non-standard' norms: They can vary all the way from (almost) internationally recognized varieties of English, such as the West African or Indian brands (not to speak of other, still more 'native' reaches of the Old Empire!) to an emerging, not yet quite arrivé, member of the 'International English' Club like 'Nipponized English' (see, e.g., Mey 1986 for examples of this so-called 'NE').

The lack of balance in international environments between native and non-native users of an 'international' language could, furthermore, be redressed by stipulating (as Suzuki has suggested (in pers. comm.)) that there simply be introduced a ban on the use of native languages by natives in such surroundings. Thus, e.g., English speakers would have to resort to French or Russian, the French would be obliged to express themselves in Chinese or Arabic, and so on. This solution would indeed, at least partially, solve the non-native speakers' problems, even though it would not take care of all their difficulties. Given that, for a long time to come, we probably still will have to have simultaneous translation facilities at major international political or economic conferences, such a policy would still be in keeping with our main objective: To put an end to all discrimination due to the 'linguistic imperialism' of the tongues of the mighty.

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